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# Literature of Loss and Place: An Illustrated View

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Literature of Loss and Place:  
An Illustrated View

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May 2001

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## ABSTRACT

Part One of this thesis, "Inseparably Connected to Place," analyzes Terry Tempest Williams's Refuge (1991) in terms of the effect the land has on the author, and analyzes the author-land relationship in terms of human attachment and loss theory.

Part Two, "A Glimpse into my Topophilia," is my own creative expression. The pieces of the collection mirror the pieces of my grief and the places that have informed my life. The collection reflects my studies regarding the interplay of illustration with the written word, the various stages of attachment and loss, and the primacy of place in the human experience.

## PREFACE

My first course at Skidmore College examined ways in which Americans have responded to the land. In exploring the perspectives of geology, art, history, and literature, I became very interested in how place is portrayed in literature as a source of illumination for writers sorting out family relationships and life events. The study of place struck a chord with me as I realized the relevance of ties to the land in my own writing and artwork. Literature of place, along with literature of loss and illustrated literature, became central to my master's studies.

This thesis project reflects the interdisciplinary nature of my studies and applies this approach to a seminal text, Terry Tempest Williams's Refuge (1991). Part One, "Inseparably Connected to Place," draws from my theoretical study of loss and place, and applies it to Refuge, which contains strong representations of both themes. This part of the project is a cross-disciplinary study of the personal memoir genre with reflections on loss and the nature literature genre with the study of place.

Part Two, "A Glimpse into my Topophilia," is my own creative expression, growing out of the genre studies introduced in my coursework. This section of poetry and essays is illustrated with botanical drawings rendered in watercolor pencil. My illustrations are intended to be

suggestive and subtle, to complement the written work which looks closely at a single incident or emotional tie between loss and place. Both words and images reflect my concept of grief as a gaping hole which cannot be described in its entirety; it can only be accurately portrayed in brief glimpses which reveal part of the whole.

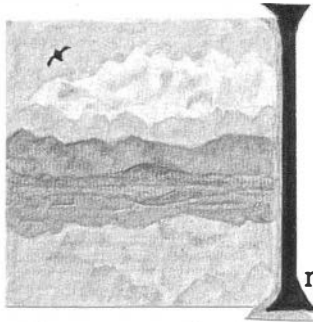
Like Williams, I find peace in shared moments with loved ones, together in the natural world. I, too, find strength and solace in the moment itself and in the lasting memory. Nature lends continuity to a world that for me has been fragmented by loss, similar to the way Williams finds continuity for her dying mother's memory by merging it with the enduring realm of nature. While Williams's text follows a chronological timeline with a full overview of her loss, my account presents random scenes echoing my theme of fragmentation.

In reflecting this fragmentation, my effort is to convey a fleeting understanding of a certain feeling or to describe a single scene or experience, which when added to the other pieces, reveals the overall form. As a creative writing project, the pieces of the collection mirror the pieces of my grief and the places that have informed my life. As a thesis project, the collection reflects my studies regarding the interplay of illustration with the written word, the various stages of attachment and loss, and the primacy of place in the human experience.

To reflect my Victorian studies coursework which first brought together my interests of art and literature, I begin each of the two parts of the project with a pictorial capital.



## Inseparably Connected to Place



In Refuge, Terry Tempest Williams recounts the illness and death of her mother, intertwined with observations of the flooding of the Great Salt Lake, which damages a migratory bird refuge. Williams uses these two stories to reveal how her observations as a naturalist taught her how to cope with death and to embrace change. This sensitivity to the land and human behavior links Williams with the early American nature writers, and with other writers of the West. Further, Refuge invites analysis in terms of cultural geography theory as well as human psychology theory.

Cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan defines topophilia as "the affective bond between people and place or setting. Diffuse as concept, vivid and concrete as personal experience" (4). Williams's work is based on this sense of topophilia and is effective in conveying her sense to the reader because Williams describes her personal experiences in vivid and concrete expressions. I analyze Refuge in terms of the effect the land has on the author, and I analyze the author-land relationship in terms of human attachment and

loss theory. Other critical work on Refuge includes various angles of the land relationship, analyzed from the perspectives of gender relations, nature writing traditions, environmental criticism, American regional writing traditions, and ecology studies.<sup>1</sup> The recent British Green Studies Reader includes Refuge as an example of both women's studies and nature studies genres. Cheryll Glotfelty asserts that Williams breaks new ground in both forms with Refuge, "particularly [in] its gendered stance and its contesting of boundaries . . . Williams invents a literary art form consonant with ecofeminist philosophy" (295). My analysis differs from these previous studies by exploring topophilia in Refuge and explaining it in terms of psychology theory.

Similar to the early American environmentalist writers, Williams studies the spiritual insights and lessons of community found in nature juxtaposed with the struggles of human nature and mortality. She uses the sense of place beyond simply the setting of her story; she treats place more as a character interacting with the human characters. Not just a backdrop, place becomes a source of illumination in sorting out family relationships and life events.

Williams discusses the power of wilderness to improve human character. This approach resonates with Henry David Thoreau, who, in 1851, wrote: "A town is saved, not more by the righteous men in it than by the woods and swamps that surround it" (38). In Refuge, Williams writes:

It's strange how deserts turn us into believers. I believe in walking in a landscape of mirages, because you learn humility. I believe in living in a land of little water because life is drawn together. . . . every pilgrimage to the desert is a pilgrimage to the self. There is no place to hide, and so we are found. (148)

Similar to Thoreau's use of "saved," Williams uses terms with religious overtones like "believers," "pilgrimage," and "we are found." Williams follows in the tradition of Thoreau in discussing the landscape, especially wild landscape, as if it has some kind of redemptive power.

The effect of wilderness on human beings is also a theme in the work of contemporary Western nature writers. In his definition of a Western, John Milton asserts: "The upper case Western . . . 'is of high literary quality . . . is sensitive to human behavior as well as to meaningful qualities of the land'" (qtd. in Lojek 146). On this basis, Williams is a Western writer not only because of the geographical setting of her story, but because in her work the meaningful qualities of the land are just as significant as human behavior. A similar standard is true of Wallace Stegner's writing. Susan J. Tyburski analyzes Stegner's use of the desert setting: "It is as if this desert spot was a single shining point in the midst of encroaching civilization, where one was exposed to the bare essence of

existence, and thus came closest to the secrets of life and death" (138). Wilderness puts people in the stark situation of survival or death. Without this sense of urgency, people would not come to know themselves. Stegner places his characters in wild landscapes, so they have to grapple with the task of existence and thereby find self-knowledge. Williams likewise turns to the wilderness, searching for answers about life and death, and comes to know herself.

This thread of wilderness informing self-knowledge is also notable in the work of Western author Norman Maclean. Charles E. Little, analyzing Maclean's A River Runs Through It, writes of nature as an Eden-like test of human understanding. He concludes: "The world of nature is hard, not soft; sublime, not merely 'beautiful.' It is a testing, and those who pass become truly human. Genesis in the garden of the real world" (par. 9). Once again, religious terms are used to explain the effect of nature on the human character. Little notes that for Maclean, the origins of true humanity are found in the natural world. It is a philosophy much akin to that of Williams.

For Williams, the biological world is inseparably connected with character development. Respect for the natural environment, characterized by a requisite familiarity with the same, is held as the ideal for human behavior. Terry Tempest Williams believes that one must be committed to community, rather than just self. In an interview with Scott

London, Williams elaborates:

I really believe that to stay home, to learn the names of things, to realize who we live among . . . the notion that we can extend our sense of community, our idea of community, to include all life forms--plants, animals, rocks, rivers and human beings--then I believe a politics of place emerges where we are deeply accountable to our communities, to our neighborhoods, to our home. ("Politics")

Success in Williams's ideal would have to include cooperative living in both the human and biological communities and a sense of accountability, not just curiosity. Further, this standard is suggested not simply for the benefit of nature, but to profit human nature.

Williams finds that weaknesses in human character are tied to careless human interaction with nature: "I think our lack of intimacy with the land has initiated a lack of intimacy with each other. What we perceive as non-human, outside of us, is actually in direct relationship with us" ("Politics"). Conversely, she finds meaningful interaction with nature has the power to improve human character:

I think that the only thing that can bring us into a place of fullness is being out in the land with other. Then we remember where the source of our power lies. . . . So, I think there is much to

preserve--not just landscape, but the qualities  
that are inherent in landscape, in wild places:  
silence, darkness. ("Politics")

This view comes back again to Thoreau's notion of how the woods and swamps can save a town and re-emphasizes how Williams's theories are closely tied to the American nature writing tradition.

In "The Self in Nature," Lynn Ross-Bryant describes Williams as an American nature writer or literary naturalist, whose autobiographical Refuge combines the exploration of self "with a spiritual journey that takes place within and in relation to the natural world" (83). Ross-Bryant writes further:

Through [Williams's] experiences in and with her natural and her human habitat she deepens who she is and, having lived through crises in both habitats, she learns to adapt by acting on the social order. Here, we see the self develop in the natural, historical, and social realms. . . . And she learns from the birds about adaptation. She can learn from them because she shares a world with them. (99)

This citation illustrates how Williams uses herself as an example of how nature can inform the human experience. As a poet and a scientist, Williams is well suited for combining the human and biological communities, as Jeanne Braham notes:

"The scientist sees the thing itself--its measurements, textures, specifications. The poet explores the dimensions, the associative richness triggered by examining the physical object" (604). Braham cites the author's references to a great blue heron in its lake habitat, appearing repeatedly in Williams's account of her mother's death:

In each incarnation the heron is less associated with geographic landscape and more associated with inscape, the internal meditations necessary to come to terms with her mother's death. Finally, Williams is able to say, "Refuge is not a place outside of myself." Instead, she must "see the land and myself in context." (604)

Williams's understanding of the natural world helps her better understand her own situation.

Following the Emersonian belief in nature's power to heal, Williams writes of nature or wilderness as having some sort of saving power. The characters in Refuge learn the significant lessons of life through their interaction with the natural world. Nature is the lens through which Williams examines personal history and family relations, seeking a deeper understanding of the people she loves and the events that have taken place. For Williams, nature teaches her what she needs to know to survive personal crisis.

Williams's Refuge describes her simultaneous crises of family and nature. True to what she has expressed in theory,

in her real life the two realms are so far intertwined that they are hard to separate. Indeed, speaking of her family, Williams has noted: "Our affection toward each other is the same as our affection toward the land" (Regan). While the intertwining makes her situation doubly painful, watching the birds adapt to their flooded habitat helps Williams, in turn, cope with her mother's illness and death.

This instinct to turn earthward seems to come from the author's mother. From her, Williams learned that nature can ground one to the true self and also be a bond between wife and husband. She quotes her mother, Diane, in the narrative:

·"I am realizing the natural world is my connection to myself. . . . The natural world is a third party in our marriage. It holds us close and lets us revel in the intimacy of all that is real." (87)

Later, Diane explains:

·"It's all inside," she said. "I just needed to get away, to be reminded by the desert of who I am and who I am not. The exposed geologic layers in the redrock mirror the depths within myself." (136)

In these passages, Diane Tempest reveals her personal belief in nature as the facilitator by which one comes to know oneself or another. She believes this intimacy and self-examination is made possible only in a nature setting.

Williams follows her mother's example. When she mentions her husband, Brooke, in the narrative, it is often



as the couple canoe, hike, study birds, or camp together. Of one such occasion, watching birds from a shared sleeping bag outdoors, Williams records, "We are safe" (150). The safety is dependent on being together as well as being in the natural world. This sentiment is reiterated in the author's title page inscription, which expands upon the book's title: "In the healing grace of the Earth. Refuge--In the land--In each other" (personal copy). On the couple's anniversary, they include the natural world in a lakeside tribute: "We toast to marriage and the indomitable spirit of Great Salt Lake" (153). Nature is not just a frequent setting or a regular companion, but a necessary partner. Williams requires both partners, the land and her husband, in order to survive the time of crisis she is recounting in Refuge.

In the course of the narrative, Williams describes frequent nature outings with her mother: hiking, picnicking on the shores of the lake, bird watching, walking in the autumn leaves, sitting and talking in the back yard, etc. She and her mother find peace in shared moments in the natural world, as when they float together in the Great Salt Lake "We drifted for hours. Merging with salt water and sky so completely, we were resolved, dissolved, in peace" (78). In these difficult years, they frequently turn to the earth for solace, feeling such intimacy that the sense of self merges with the sense of place.

The outings seem to serve a dual purpose. First, they

build up memories of shared times, as in: "I also knew the power of this October afternoon. In another time, this moment would surface and carry me over rugged terrain. It would become one reservoir of strength" (192). The daughter is consciously seeking and savoring these happy times together, not just for the moment itself, but for its storage value. She believes in nature's power to heal. Even the language in this account speaks in natural terms: when the moment "surfaces" as if from underwater, an emotional crisis is likened to "rugged terrain," and her strength is stored in a "reservoir" for a time of emotional drought.

The second function of the outings turns out to be the author's need to adapt to imminent loss. She sees herself, her mother, and grandmother as forever linked by their joint communion with the land and water:

•The heartbeats I felt in the womb--two heartbeats, at once, my mother's and my own--are heartbeats of the land. (85)

Similarly, she notes:

. . . . if I take this lens and focus on Great Salt Lake, I see waves rolling in one after another: my mother, my grandmother, myself. (177)

Becoming one with nature provides not only closeness, but strength. The resiliency of nature becomes the resiliency of self. Williams feels better able to face the separation of death if she can think of herself forever linked to her loved

ones through their common love of the land and the lake.

Rather than fight what she cannot control, Williams eventually surrenders herself to the power she believes can sustain her: the natural world. Ross-Bryant comments on the subtitle of Refuge, An Unnatural History of Family and Place:

"Unnatural history" is a history of resistance; natural history is one of adaptation. After living through and into the cancer and her mother's life and death and the rising lake and the birds, [Williams] can say, "Refuge is not a place outside myself. Like the lone heron who walks the shores of the Great Salt Lake, I am adapting as the world is adapting." (100)

Through a sense of place, Williams feels connected to her family whether they are physically present or not. She learns to adapt to the absence of family because the land itself evokes a clear sense of home. It is enough to see the birds, to hear their familiar cries, to recall the distinctive smell of salt water, to feel the wind brushing past, for landscape to propel healing. In the tradition of American nature writing, Refuge shows how the meaningful qualities of the land impact human behavior. For Williams, nature goes far beyond the role of setting and actually facilitates personal examination and understanding--perhaps the most meaningful journey upon which one can embark.

Transformed by Immersion

Williams has a long history with the place she writes about. In the terms of cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, Williams writes as a native of the land she studies. Tuan explains that in contrast to the visitor's viewpoint which is simple and easily stated, "The native . . . has a complex attitude derived from his immersion in the totality of his environment . . . [which] can be expressed by him only with difficulty and indirectly through behavior, local tradition, lore, and myth" (63). The writing of place by Williams has this complexity and multi-faceted expression typical of a native's perception, allowing the reader to understand the experience as a feeling participant, not as a detached visitor. In Refuge, Williams asserts that her personal identity is drawn from the place she lives: family roots in place, lessons learned from the land, and hope that springs from the spirit of the land.

Williams writes that she comes "from a family with deep roots in the American West." Her ancestors were among the Mormon settlers arriving in Utah in the 1850s, having travelled the 1200-mile trail on foot:

Almost one hundred and fifty years later, we are still here. . . . Aunts, uncles, and cousins are many, extending familial ties all across the state of Utah. . . . As a people and as a family, we have a sense of history. And our history is tied to

land. (13-14)

As a Utah native, Williams has an attitude that is necessarily complex, factoring in the history of her religion, the experiences of her ancestors, the relationships of her family statewide, besides her experiences as an individual. "Each writer writes out of his or her own biases," says Williams. "I write out of my biases of gender, geography and culture. I'm a woman living in the American West who is a Mormon" (qtd. in Regan). Additionally, her training as a naturalist is evident in her writing. This mix of roles and perspectives cannot be separated into just one viewpoint, nor does Williams attempt such. Rather, she draws upon the history, traditions, lessons, and lore of each aspect to form an outlook uniquely her own.

Location is of primary importance to this author. Williams asserts: "If you know where you are, you know who you are" (qtd. in Spayde). She expresses the notion that place can actually change a person's character: "I remember the country I come from and how it informs my life" (Williams 3); and, "One's character will be shaped by the landscape" (Williams, 244). Williams not only writes of place as a life-altering influence, but describes the experience of self merging with place. Williams writes: "I am desert. I am mountains. I am Great Salt Lake" (29). Such writing is evidence of the author's immersion in the surrounding environment.

Williams is a Utah "native" not only through family history, but also as a result of a distinct personal decision to stay in the land she inherited. Williams feels this decision is a counter-cultural choice: "Sometimes the most radical act is to stay home. There issues are not abstractions--they are our lives. That creates action, impassioned action, born out of love and urgency" (qtd. in Mencimer 17). Such is the case for Williams, who, in Refuge, describes how her sense of place leads to her turmoil in political protest and spiritual searchings, but also to her peace in dealing with loss and change. Williams elaborates on the effects of commitment to place:

I really believe that to stay home, to learn the names of things, to realize who we live among . . . The notion that we can extend our sense of community, our idea of community, to include all life forms--plants, animals, rocks, rivers and human beings--then I believe a politics of place emerges where we are deeply accountable to our communities, to our neighbors, to our home. If we are not home, if we are not rooted deeply in place, making that commitment to dig in and stay put . . . if we don't know the names of things, if we don't know pronghorn antelope, if we don't know blacktail jackrabbit, if we don't know sage, pinon, juniper, then I think we are living a life without

specificity, and then our lives become  
abstractions. Then we enter a place of true  
desolation. ("Politics")

Williams enlarges her commitment to place beyond the human community to include the elements and creatures of the natural world. This idea is not limited to humans as caretakers, but leads to Williams's belief that the natural world enriches humanity.

One theme Williams writes of in Refuge is how the silent instruction of the land enriches the human spirit. Sometimes the silence alone is her refreshment:

·I walk these open spaces in silence, relishing the  
monotony of the Refuge in winter. (91)

Again, she notes:

·The stillness of the desert instructs me like a  
trail of light over water. (109.

Finally:

·The fullness of silence. I am learning what this  
means. (219)

The silence Williams describes extends the definition beyond just quietness, as found in a sound booth. Williams finds in nature a nurturing silence that is peaceful and rejuvenating. At other times, her quiet observation of the land is a tutorial:

·The hostility of this landscape teaches me how to  
be quiet and unobtrusive, how to find grace among

spiders with a poisonous bite. (147)

She remarks further:

·I believe in walking in a landscape of mirages,  
because you learn humility. I believe in living in  
a land of little water because life is drawn  
together. . . . every pilgrimage to the desert is a  
pilgrimage to the self. (148)

Most lessons are intangible and unuttered, but Williams credits the land with teaching her about stillness, consistency, grace, humility, interdependency and self-knowledge. Facing the uncertainty of mortality, Williams notes similar uncertainty in the unpredictable dangers of nature and in the constantly changing appearance and condition of the land.

Williams gains a specific belief from the land--hope. In the Great Basin of the Rockies, Williams muses over the Utah sightings of bird species far from their normal habitats and quotes poet Emily Dickinson to explain how hope stems from the natural world:

How can hope be denied when there is always the possibility of an American flamingo or a roseate spoonbill flourishing down from the sky like pink rose petals? How can we rely solely on the statistical evidence and percentages that would shackle our lives when red-necked grebes, bar-tailed godwits, and wandering tattlers come into



our country? When Emily Dickinson writes, 'Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul,' she reminds us, as the birds do, of the liberation and pragmatism of belief. (90)

Her connection with the land and birds leads Williams to recognize hope. Dickinson's metaphor is perfect for Williams, for it is her observation of bird life adapting to its flooded habitat that informs her own adaptation to the death of her mother. "My physical mother is gone. My spiritual mother remains," asserts Williams, who believes the earth has a spirit (241). Mother Earth is her spiritual mother, her comforter, her loving teacher. In claiming the land as her own, Williams returns herself to the land to be re-formed and liberated by the spirit she discovers there. "I am a woman with wings," concludes Williams (273). As such, she is a woman with hope and the power to rise above pain, a being who draws sustenance from the land.

Williams writes convincingly of the primacy of place. She details the roots she has in the land and what the land has taught her. Her environmental immersion brings her in touch with the spirit of the land into a relationship which is dynamic and multi-faceted. It is a baptism born of deep conviction and with life-changing consequences.

#### Attachment, Loss and Adjustment in Refuge

Classic psychology research describes childhood

attachment to a parent as a distinct motivational system characterized by the child seeking the attachment figure in situations of stress or emergency; the child experiences a decline in fear and an increase in feelings of security when the goal of proximity is attained. The child may afterwards resume the distance from the attachment figure in order to explore independently. Researcher John Bowlby writes: "Many of the most intense emotions arise during the formation, the maintenance, the disruption, and the renewal of attachment relationships" (qtd. in Cassidy 6). The attachment relationship is further characterized by a predictable separation response when the child demonstrates protest, despair, and detachment in successive phases following loss of the attachment figure. Adjustment to the separation is evidenced by the child's personal transformation, such as new creative expressions, forming of new attachments, or emotional reinvestment in a new interest (Lieberman 112-117).

We can apply this attachment theory to Refuge, which chronicles the author's loss of her mother to ovarian cancer jointly with the loss of a beloved bird refuge, the Bear River Bird Sanctuary, due to flood damage. As maternal attachment is well understood, my focus here will be on a similar attachment Williams forms with the bird refuge. The separation response of protest-despair-detachment appears in both relationships: author and mother; author and land. Finally, I argue that adjustment to the maternal loss occurs

in the author's merging the image of her mother with the image of the land and producing the creative expression Refuge.

In Refuge, Terry Tempest Williams refers often to her ties to the land: "I remember the country I come from and how it informs my life" (3); "As a people and as a family, we have a sense of history. And our history is tied to land" (14). In particular, Williams feels tied to the Bear River Bird Sanctuary which she has visited since childhood with her grandmother, Mimi: "Our attachment to the land was our attachment to each other. . . . The Bird Refuge was a sanctuary for my grandmother and me" (15); "I knew these birds from our private trips to the Refuge. They had become relatives" (19). Williams clearly states that she feels little distinction between attachment to family and to the land she loves.

After twenty years, Williams not only knows the birds and their habitats as one would know one's relatives; she further feels that this shared knowledge and love of the birds ties her to her grandmother, and the two of them find a kind of emotional or spiritual refuge at the bird sanctuary. Repeatedly visiting the same nesting grounds fosters a reassuring familiarity with the rhythms of the seasons and the cycles of birth, growth, and migration. Williams acknowledges the dependability of these rhythms in her own life: "There are birds you gauge your life by" (8). Williams

turns to the refuge not only for recreation, but to pursue her professional career as a naturalist.

The burrowing owls are the first bird refuge loss Williams describes in Refuge. Typical of the attachment-loss reaction, Williams responds with anger: "I knew rage. It was fire in my stomach with no place to go" (12). Next, she tells her mother of the loss. This is also typical behavior - to seek out the primary attachment figure in a time of stress or emergency. As flood waters destroy more of the refuge, Williams describes the despair phase of loss: "A deep sadness washes over me for all that has been lost. . . . I am not adjusting. . . . There is no one to blame, nothing to fight" (140). Observing the bird life around her, Williams recognizes that the birds are not defeated by their circumstances. The author records the lessons of adaptation that she learns by watching the displaced birds:

•A wedge of long-billed curlews flying in the night punctuates the silences and their unexpected calls remind us the only thing we can expect is change.  
(146)

This theme resonates:

•I sat on a lone boulder in the midst of the curlews. By now, they had grown accustomed to me. This too, I found encouraging--that in the face of stressful intrusions, we can eventually settle in.  
(147)

Williams continues to parallel the changing and unpredictable reality of her life with the cycles of the natural world. With these parallels to the birds she understands so well, Williams comes to understand her own pain better and the pain is therefore more manageable. Like the curlews, she must learn to expect change and to adjust to intrusions:

•Snowy plovers come to mind. They can teach me how to survive. (260)

She reflects:

•On days such as this, when my soul has been wrenched, the simplicity of flight and form above the lake untangles by grief. "Glide" the gulls write in the sky--and, for a few brief moments, I do. (75)

Williams repeatedly focuses on the birds, seeking some kind of guidance through an emotional landscape she feels unprepared to navigate. Exhausted by the complexities she is coping with, she observes the comparatively simple solution that gulls take to regain their strength: they glide. It is a reminder that complex questions do not always have complex answers; sometimes one must even stop looking for answers:

•Because of its high salinity, Great Salt Lake yields no fish.. . . Consequently, gulls must fly great distances between island nesting sites and foraging grounds. (71) . . . I continue to watch the gulls. Their pilgrimage from salt water to

fresh becomes my own. (76)

In watching the birds respond to their flooded habitat, Williams feels a camaraderie for her own loss. She sees herself as a bird, and Great Salt Lake becomes a symbol for the overflowing pool of her tears. Like the gulls, she must leave the salt water to find the sustenance necessary to live. Studying the ways of her bird friends tutors the author in how to survive her own grief.

In terms of maternal attachment, Williams's adult relationship with her mother is unusually close. Writing of a shared phone call, Williams says, "This is how my days always began. Mother and I checking in" (22). The author muses on the maternal bond:

What is it about the relationship of a mother that can heal or hurt us? Her womb is the first landscape we inhabit. It is here we learn to respond--to move, to listen, to be nourished and grow. . . . Our maternal environment is perfectly safe. . . . The umbilical cord is cut--not at our request. Separation is immediate. . . . Minutes old, our first death is our own birth. (50)

Even as she describes maternal attachment, Williams uses the terms of a naturalist: landscape, inhabit, environment. Such terminology illuminates the writer's attachment to both mother and the land. She writes, "I could not separate the Bird Refuge from my family" (40). There is no clear

demarkation between ties to the land and ties to each other, and both relationships are powerful.

Upon learning of her mother's ovarian cancer, Williams writes, "Suffering shows us what we are attached to--perhaps the umbilical cord between Mother and me has never been cut" (53). As the crisis is detailed in the narrative, Williams alternates between needing to be with her mother and needing to be immersed in the natural world. She will be at her mother's side for medical tests and consultations and then record: "I fled for Bear River, for the birds, wishing someone would rescue me" (68); "I go to the lake for a compass reading, to orient myself once again in the midst of change" (75). When her mother requires constant nursing care, Williams gains peace by viewing nature from a distance: "I leave Mother, close the door, and escape into the living room. Through the windows, my eyes focus on Great Salt Lake" (226). The narrative gives repeated evidence that Williams turns to the land of her attachment in times of crisis, experiencing a decline in fear and an increase in feelings of security when she can attain proximity to the lake and birds.

The typical separation response is apparent in Williams's protest, despair, and initial inability to accept maternal detachment that looms as her mother's cancer proves terminal. "I found myself getting angry," Williams writes of her first, gut reaction to news of her mother's tumor (23). "Maybe it's nothing," is her next response (24). Finally,

Williams recognizes that denying the gravity of her mother's situation is hurtful to her mother: "I have refused to believe that Mother will die. And by denying her cancer, even her death, I deny her life" (75-6). In the latter stages of her mother's illness, Williams writes, "I am left trembling, frightened by all I don't know" (225).

In finally recognizing the imminent loss of her mother, Williams copes with her fear by merging the image of her mother, who is slipping away, with the image of Mother Nature, that remains accessible. This coping response blurs the boundaries between three coping methods identified by psychologists: substitution, merger, and identification. On the method of substitution, Helen Block Lewis writes: "Some form of substitute attachment normally replaces separation, whether the substitute is another person or a symbolic love affair with some interesting things in the world or both" (518). Researchers Frank Lachmann, Beatrice Beebe and Robert Stolorow define merger as "a fantasy of oneness and/or experience of union with another person whose qualities are felt as one's own" in contrast to "identification" in which "wished-for or feared qualities of others are incorporated and integrated into an already well-structured sense of self" (401).

With a mix of these coping methods, Williams finds solace in her well-established attachment to the natural world when she unites the beloved qualities of her mother



with the qualities in nature. Williams manages this adaptation by projecting her mother onto images of nature: "Antelope Island is no longer accessible to me. It is my mother's body floating in uncertainty" (64). In this case, the island metaphor describes William's emotional pain, but also serves to merge the image of the loved person with the image of the loved landscape. Williams is not fantasizing a oneness between herself and her mother, nor is she incorporating the wished-for qualities into herself. Instead, Williams seems to integrate the nurturing, calming, watchful qualities of her mother with the landscape:

·The depth and stillness of Great Salt Lake comes over the wetlands like a mother's calming hand.  
(151)

In another place, she records:

·I laid my head on her lap and closed my eyes. I could not tell if it was my mother's fingers combing through my hair or the wind. (156)

By personifying the natural world, Williams finds a way to hold onto the feeling she gets from the soothing touch of her mother's hands. If the lake has hands or the wind has hands, then Williams will never be without her mother's touch:

·One night, a full moon watched over me like a mother. (189)

Again, she notes:

·A full moon hung in a starlit sky. It was

Mother's face illumined. (232)

If the moon can be merged with the image of Williams's mother, then the author will never go long without seeing her mother's face. Each night she will feel that her mother has come back to watch over her:

·Lying in my hammock at home, the wind rocks me back and forth. It is all that is left to comfort me. (273)

She reminisces:

·I am reminded that what I adore, admire, and draw from Mother is inherent in the Earth. My mother's spirit can be recalled simply by placing my hands on the black humus of mountains or the lean sands of desert. Her love, her warmth, and her breath, even her arms around me--are the waves, the wind, sunlight, and water. (214)

Williams thinks of the wind rocking her hammock like a mother rocking a cradle. She takes comfort in feeling her mother's attributes resonating in the earth. In all of these instances, it does not matter who is calming her, watching over her, combing her hair, or comforting her; the soothing result is what matters. This blending of images of mother and earth allows Williams to adjust emotionally to the death of her mother. "My physical mother is gone. My spiritual mother remains," concludes Williams (241).

Observing the birds adjust to the loss of their habitat

helps Williams adjust to her own maternal loss. Research by regional naturalists eventually reveals that the birds displaced by the flooded Great Salt Lake have been adopted and absorbed into flocks in southeastern Oregon, Nevada, and different parts of Utah. "The birds have simply moved on. They give me the courage to do the same," notes Williams (253). Later, she writes, "Like the lone Heron who walks the shores of Great Salt Lake, I am adapting as the world is adapting" (267). Besides her own statements, Williams manifests her adjustment in other ways. The author and her grandmother Mimi view Williams's scar from a hiking fall in symbolic terms:

"Many native cultures participate in scarification rituals. It's a sign that denotes change. The person who is scarred has undergone some kind of transformation," [says Mimi]. The next time I looked into the mirror, I saw a woman with green eyes and a red scar painted down the center of her forehead. (244)

Williams recognizes both the deep emotional pain that loss has caused her and the personal transformation that has enabled her to continue her life.

The most tangible evidence of this transformation is the book Refuge itself. In the prologue, Williams writes: "Perhaps I am telling this story in an attempt to heal myself, to confront what I do not know, to create a path for

myself with the idea that 'memory is the only way home'" (4). By the end of the book, Williams has presented a convincing narrative that reflects her pain and her healing and the path she is creating for herself. The final chapter is indicative of her path. In this chapter, Williams writes of her family history of cancer, their exposure to the fallout from nuclear testing in the 1950s and 60s, and her own decision to participate in a protest of civil disobedience which leads to her brief arrest. Such an action is evidence of Williams emotionally reinvesting in a new direction.

The book Refuge is a remarkable account of attachment, loss, and adjustment. Williams describes with deep feeling and clarity her love for her mother and her love for nature. Faced with the seemingly overwhelming loss of her mother, Williams finds the courage to mirror the adaptability of the birds she studies and to adapt to loss herself by observing the treasured qualities of her dying mother in the landscape that will always remain. By merging the image of the mother she is losing with mother earth, Williams finds restored confidence in herself and her ability to face the future. The account itself is convincing evidence that, despite the pain she experiences, the author is not weakened, but empowered. The land is not just a metaphor that allows Williams to explain her life journey to others; the land is her sustenance and imperative to her survival.

## Notes

1. Recent analysis includes Kircher's dissertation on how women writers of the American West reshape the dichotomous nature of twentieth-century culture, specifically how Williams uses feminine tropes to illustrate her closeness to the natural world. Oubre's dissertation discusses Refuge and other contemporary American women writers from the standpoint of ecological literary criticism and environmental awareness that protects the land by seeing it as sacred. Smith's dissertation discusses five contemporary texts and the authors' attachment to place and the process of change in terms of an anti-nostalgic context of American regional and nature writing. Frost's thesis examines the wilderness experiences of three women writers by noting the effects nature and humans have on each other.

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## A Glimpse Into My Topophilia

Polly Parkinson

Dedicated to the memory of

B.R. Parkinson  
1893-1976

James Watson  
1906-1982

Chris Parkinson  
1968-1982

David P. Parkinson  
1939-1984

Karma P. Parkinson  
1896-1988

Henrietta H. H. Watson  
1906-1988

Tall grass



tall grass



why is the sky so blue today?  
why?  
i want to know  
why

why do the clouds all float  
away  
especially the ones i love

once  
we laid in tall grass  
and looked at the clouds  
my dad's long legs stretched out

Chris saw a cloud shaped like a clown  
she smiled with eyes of sky

the sky turned grey  
we were blown apart  
i'm not sure what to see in the clouds today.



Pine bough & cone



## Pine

My family has become part of the land, buried in a tiny cemetery in Franklin, Idaho. My father was always pleased to remind us that his hometown is the oldest in the state, established by his pioneer grandparents in 1860. The year is proudly marked on the side of "Little Mountain" with giant numerals formed of whitewashed stones. We picnicked on that hillside when I was a child, exploring Devil's Cave after the roosting pigeons cleared out. Dad would play tag with us, dodging through the sagebrush.

Dad is buried now under the tall pines in the Franklin cemetery near the dignified marble pillar erected for our pioneer ancestors. It's not far off the rural two-lane highway, just over the old railroad tracks. You see the pines in the distance and know it is time to slow down. We stopped there many times in my childhood, visitors from out of state returning to the family roots. The peaceful, giant pines are what I remember best. They lend dignity to the quiet. They must be as old as the town, but so unchanged in comparison.

Franklin has altered with the times, from the horse-and-buggy town where my great-great-grandfather managed a community co-op and country store, through the boom and bust of the railroad days and local industry, to the hottest lottery-ticket outlet in the state (easiest drive from the

border of lottery-less Utah). Still no full traffic signal, just a flashing amber. The pines stand clustered outside the city limits; they are unaffected by the farm crisis, the price of local mink pelts, or the surge of lottery sales.

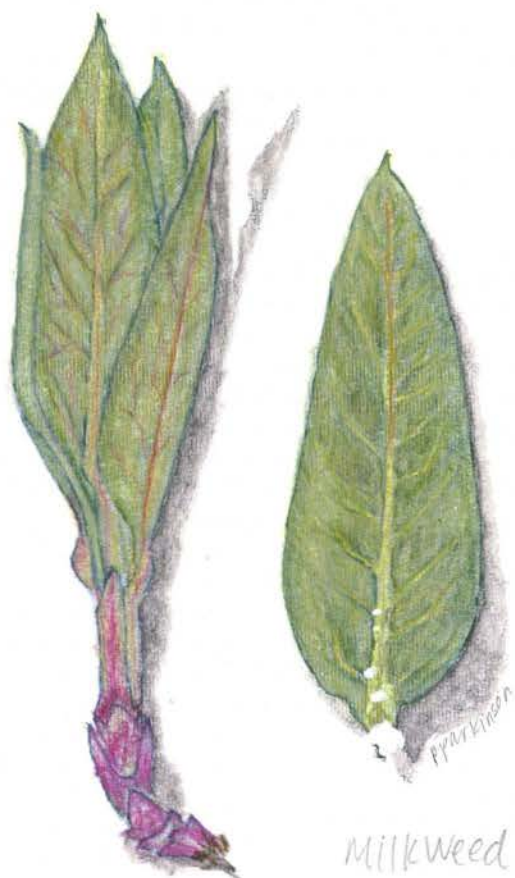
I've visited the pines in all weather. Snowflakes were falling slowly the day my little sister's casket was carried through the trees to a hole disguised by the mortuary's artificial turf. The boughs were well-blanketed the winter morning Grandma was laid to rest. My cousin's video camera seemed out of place that day, but at least the trees were real. I plan my visits now for the summer when we can sit in the shade while we let the water spigot soak the troublesome grass.

For fifteen years now, I have come to remove thistles and reseed the grass that never grew in properly over the burial plots. Always, I plant something, hoping blossoms or new growth will greet me on next year's visit. The land doesn't accept my improvements. The winters are too cold, the rains too unpredictable, and the caretaker's mower too indifferent. The dwarf Alberta spruce held up for several years until a cold snap froze a rust spot on the south side. The daffodils only came back one year. The deep red peonies, bright tulips, potentilla with sprigs of tiny yellow blossoms, thorned barberry, chrysanthemums--none fared any better.

Now I respect the pines for their longevity and

sameness. It took me years to stop buying my favorite flowers from the nursery and choose from native species instead. Maybe after more years I will get over my need to add anything at all to the landscape. Maybe the towering age-old pines are memorial enough to my loss and decoration enough for the graves of those with modest strength and unconcerned beauty.





Milkweed

milkweed

where i broke off a stem,  
white drops oozed  
in a milky trickle from the plant  
growing wild  
in the vacant lot next door.

"bring the plant you found  
it on," my mother had said  
as we settled my caterpillar  
in the glass quart jar  
that would be its home.

i liked to pound the hammer  
on a sharp nail, driving  
breathing holes into the jar lid

after a short, quiet life  
of milkweed consumption,  
my caterpillar cocooned itself  
in a dark sack,  
hanging from a broken twig,  
looking quite dead.

our vigil saw the dark thing,  
left alone and unjustled,  
take on color

orange-hued, and variegated  
in stained glass shapes  
outlined in black, the wings  
slowly stretched and fanned  
themselves dry.

i let it go.  
my jar lid cast aside.  
i watched it flit away.





Boxwood

## Boxwood

Last summer I moved to a new house. I had mixed feelings, though it was just a few blocks away. The house had what my husband David and I agreed were priorities: two car garage, master bath, three bedrooms, automatic sprinklers, air conditioning. Most importantly, it was in excellent condition and required no remodeling beyond painting over the former owner's favorite pink walls.

David and the realtor were mystified at my lack of enthusiasm when we signed the contract. I struggled with leaving behind a home I had loved for eight years and all of the memories attached to it. I resisted the conventional wisdom of "bigger is better." Though even my most frugal mother thought we needed more space, I feared I was straying from my minimalist roots. I felt out of sorts and unmoored, too far from home.

After our offer was accepted, the owner, Anne, took me on a more detailed tour of the yard, naming the various perennials and trees. Thus began my first real attachment to our new home. Anne pointed out the clematis beginning to wind about the east trellis. I always wanted a clematis, which Mom said had been Grandma's specialty. There was a "bleeding heart"--the blossoms which my father used to hold upside down and call "lady in a bathtub." I found aspen trees similar to those at my family home in Montana. I

screen door.

I called my brother Mark to update him about my waning trepidation and reluctance, and to share my new-found optimism and satisfaction. My brother is woven into the fabric of those idyllic summer days. In his apartment on the upper west side of Manhattan, he listened to me describe the smell of boxwood. Across the country, remembering back twenty years, he knew exactly what I meant. Neighboring his apartment complex is Fort Tryon Park. There he found boxwood that gave him the same comfort I had found. You take the main promenade, he told me, and just before the stairs to the flagpole, as you round the corner--take a big whiff. It had taken a while to figure out why the smell was so nice, comfortable, safe like a loving family. "I oftentimes take a little piece and rub it between my fingers," he confided, "until the smell rubs off on my hand and then I go about smelling my fingers all day."

Mark takes his young children to the park to look for bird's nests. They ride bicycles and climb on big rocks. On the way home, they buy raspberries from the city grocer. We used to eat them with cream and sugar in Aunt Diane's kitchen. Now, as my brother lifts the berry dishes from the cupboard, he can smell the boxwood on his fingers. I pull a piece from my own bush and rub it between my fingers. I am home.

sand

i grew up playing in a red rock oven  
behind our hillside house  
in moab

my brother and i squealed with glee one day  
to find a lizard there  
roasting

now my mind stores bare snippets of memory  
of the warm sandy days  
an idyll

sunny days before illness and pain and death  
in the rosy sand glass  
of childhood

a day on the dunes comes to remind me  
just how much like sand  
is my grief:

unexpectedly there when i lick my lips  
disagreeable grit i rinse from my teeth  
stuck unseen in the hair at the nape of my neck  
fine sandpaper touch on the tan skin of my knee

pours onto the floor when i uncuff my shorts  
caught behind the watchband i remove for bed  
unobtrusive dust between my long fingers  
grains in my suitcase, so many years later.





Oak leaf + acorn

A Sample of My Red Butte Data

"And we can take you to Red Butte!" I say enthusiastically to my sister, who is planning a visit from Reno. For the first time I notice that I am repeating myself and have been for years. I say that same thing to everyone who visits me. It takes me a while to figure out why.

Why do I assume that everyone who visits will be interested in a tour of the nearby gardens and arboretum? It does have a great variety of options: paved trails cleared of snow for winter walks, mountain trails for more adventure after the mud dries in the spring, cool oak leaf awnings forming tree tunnels in summer, and ducks to feed at the pond most of the year. We like to watch for deer tracks. More than once we have crossed paths with deer who note our excited whispers with a calm gaze before bounding on. My children thrill over squirrels, butterflies, ant hills, ladybugs, and spiders. If we've hiked to the high bench, we often see a raptor circling nearby, or we admire the jet lines striping a blue sky, or marvel that we can hear the crack of a baseball and bat connecting far, far below us at the Fort Douglas diamond. These invitations I'm repeating are more than just an impulsive gesture to share something I love. They are more than just a cheap gesture to get the most mileage from the season pass I have invested in,



although I confess the cheap part is true. Eventually I realize that I am trying, one by one, to collect memories of my scattered family and friends into one geographical location. I am trying to incorporate the images of those I love into a single place that I can return to often, where I can recall the presence of those who have since left.

I have a problem with this business of leaving and being left. I struggle emotionally against feeling scattered. Geographically, my family is scattered. Two of my siblings and their families who used to live in New York state have recently moved closer--my sister to Reno, Nevada, and my brother to Minneapolis, Minnesota. Five hundred and twenty-three miles, and thirteen hundred and twelve miles, respectively, from me in Salt Lake, according to the handy mileage chart in the back of my interstate road atlas. Closer, but not close. Also circled is the number seven hundred and fifty-two, which marks the intersecting columns of Salt Lake City and San Francisco, where another sister and her husband recently moved. My point of comparison is the familiar 425-mile drive that takes me "home" to my mother's house in Bozeman, Montana.

Not on the chart are my dad and sister. They are noted instead in my calendar. Chris died nineteen years ago, as of Monday, and would be 33 on the 17th of this month. If Dad hadn't died two years after Chris, he would have turned 62 this year. It is a distance I find hard to measure in days,

months, years, or birthdays. I think of all those family occasions with the gathering together that only made the losses more noticeable. Four high school graduations later, five college graduations later, one graduate degree with two more pending, four weddings missed, nine grandchildren with one more expected this spring . . . it is an impossible gap to measure.

I can't identify the borders of my loss because they keep changing. The sister I missed playing basketball with changed into the sister who never went to college with me, to the sister who wasn't there to tell a funny story at my wedding, to the sister who can't join me for a walk with our children in the jog stroller. I see my neighbor passing with her sister and their jogger, and I feel a pang. There's not a dad's lap to sit on now when I go home. There hasn't been for sixteen years, but I still miss the feeling. Now I add the regret that there isn't a grandpa's lap for my children. It would have been nice for Mom to have a partner in raising her children; now a companion for retirement is what will be missed.

Dad taught us to appreciate nature, to make it part of home. When I think of going home to Bozeman, it is the nature trail I picture as much as the house. Maybe it is a sense of family tradition that has led me to develop my own



Autumn leaves + maple pod

family ties to Red Butte. I feel I am like my father when I teach my children that a sunny day is a good day to pack a snack and fill a canteen and head for a favorite trail. I feel close to the memory of my father when I teach my children that being bored is not an option, even on a snowy day. We pile on layers of clothes, take food for the horses or ducks, and head out the door.

Psychologists, in their safely detached analysis of other people's grief, call this kind of behavior "identification." The term describes when the mourner attempts to incorporate into him or herself the wished-for qualities of the person lost. I wonder if psychologists have a term for incorporating the wished-for people into the landscape. It is my own virtual catch and release program. I am capturing memories of people I love and releasing them to a safe place where I can revisit them when I need them.

If I were a biologist, I could organize my collection of Red Butte memories in tidy little vials with neat labels recording the date, time, temperature, relative humidity, territory covered, and people present. I haven't played biologist since ninth grade science class, but I do keep a collection of memories in my mind:

- Having a sack lunch by the duck pond with my sister when she was still a kid; now she's in California expecting a kid of her own.
- Hiking the mountain trails to lunch on the bench overlooking

the valley with my brother, soon leaving for a doctoral program across the country.

-Swinging in the herb garden and feeding ducks with my cousin Margi and her little daughter Anna, who have since moved to Seattle.

-Hiking to the stone house with Gramme, visiting from Bozeman.

-Winding along the mountain trails glowing with scrub oak in their autumn colors with friends Ann and Ian, visiting from England.

-Hiking the Bonneville shoreline trail, gathering miniature acorn hats with my sister-in-law Shereen from Chicago.

-Walking the tree tunnel one last time with our friends the Lewises before they move to Canada.

I don't keep my collection in glass vials ready to uncork, but the memories are with me whenever I walk through Red Butte Gardens. Next summer, when we go to the tree tunnel, I will think of the Lewises and imagine that they are walking just ahead, through the oak leaves, on the other side of those branches. I will remember that we talked about World War II in London and how some parents sent their children away to live with relatives until the war was over. I will remember which tree trunk our children climbed on, pretending it was a galloping horse. We will climb astride once more, just to keep up the tradition. My children will suggest we hike to the stone house, like they did that time





Rosemary

with Gramme. I don't feel like going all the way to the stone house, but I will do it for the memory.

If my sister does come from Reno, I will want her to see the stone house. We will tell her children that their cousins hiked there once with Gramme. We will show them where to look for little acorn hats for their fingers. We will bring corn to feed the ducks at the pond.

My children have their own stories now. Christopher well remembers the bridge where he accidentally disturbed a wasp nest; wasps chased after him, stinging him again and again. When he reminds me, I think of how his scream roared across the peaceful garden, how I splattered the wounds with mud from the pond, picked up his shrieking little body and ran panting uphill to the visitor's center for a first aid kit. Griffin remembers the hidden trail among the cattails and will muddy his shoes there once more. We remember where we sighted deer resting in the shade, where we last spotted the family of quail. We throw crumbs in the pond and hope a huge fish will appear again to snatch the bits and then disappear. I used to carry Griffin in a backpack, but this year he hikes on his own. Christopher runs far ahead, and I have to remind him to stay in sight. It occurs to me now that someday too soon the children won't be children anymore. They won't be here to hike with me either.

I better label a lot more vials. I better capture enough memories to last. I can sense I'm going to need them.



willow



### The Nature Trail

There is a trail near our family home in Montana. Set aside as part of a community nature preserve by the city of Bozeman, it is a pleasant jogging, biking, dog-walking trail for many residents. It's not far, really, from the neighborhood houses and paved streets, but the slim dirt and gravel trail lined with fluttering aspen and thick river willows, intersecting time and again with a little stream, seems to form its own wild sphere. Not truly wild, but enough to let you breath easier and to think outside the dull structure and order of civilized life.

My family's attachment to this trail runs deep. My siblings and I, now grown and scattered across the country, never return home without walking the Sourdough Nature Trail—to us simply "the nature trail." We walk the nature trail regardless of the weather. We have pushed the jog stroller through fields of snow, or skimmed along on cross country skiis. We have covered the children with rain gear and squished through the muddy spots. We have slathered the children with sunscreen and set them in the sunny grass by the stream to splash their bare arms and legs in the cold water.

From our earliest trips on the nature trail, Dad taught us to see it in a personal, whimsical way. Various points took on honorary designations that jumped from Dad's

imagination: the caving-in wooden shack was always called the house of the three little pigs; the decrepit metal remains of an old car were always known as Uncle Wiggly's car. Other names record family history: Benny's Bridge is named in honor of my sister's alter ego, and Wipeout Bridge recalls my brother's spectacular bike wreck. Other designations recall animal sightings: the muddy patch of marsh is the frog pond regardless of whether it is dried up and uninhabited these days; we all know where the beaver pond is although it's been fifteen years since a frustrated farmer broke up their lodge and sent the beaver packing; Socks and Red are long gone from what we call the horse pasture. I've only recently realized how family history blots out the immediate facts when it comes to the nature trail. The things we keep talking about aren't there anymore, but no one notices. It's a nice thing.

Over the years family outings have included Freddie the Lhasa Apso, Buffy the cocker spaniel, Jazmine the beagle, and finally Bentley the brittany. My cat Pierre Francoise used to follow us part way, but now that's tabby Francie's job.

When we first moved to Montana, my sister Chris still rode her three-wheeled bike. Later, she rode with baby Jill on the go-cart Dad improvised. Chris died of cancer. Dad's homemade go-cart was eventually stolen from the driveway. And now Dad only walks in our memories. Enough years have passed that even Jill went off to college.

That's why we need the trail--to fill the gaping holes of absence. As long as the trail exists, we will walk it with whatever dog we can find. We will wear our traditional improvised leaf hats, oblivious to the amused glances of passers-by. Whatever children are present will be allowed to put their feet in the river, no matter how cold it is. We've walked the nature trail so much together that we don't have to see each other to know that everyone is there. Someone else just has to pick up the familiar lines for characters who have moved off stage. With comfort, I realize the setting has power enough to carry the play.



Spring aspen

*The certainty of place, the certainty that we are not lost, the certainty that the world and our lives have checkpoints with names and definite directions we can follow, the certainty.*

*--Richard Hugo*

### Driving Home

I have not always appreciated the seven-hour drive from Salt Lake to Bozeman. I still don't like long hours in the car, but after twenty years of repeating this particular trip, I find a rhythm and beauty that I value.

When my family first moved to Bozeman, my father said he thought the drive through Gallatin Canyon was the prettiest he had ever seen. Although we were then coming from the long wheat plains of Kansas, my dad had seen plenty of country. Our family lived in Cache Valley and Moab, Utah, Scotland, and England, besides taking a three-week camping trip in Europe. Dad had sailed with the merchant marines, traveled to the Middle East, and visited many states in the U.S. since his farm boy days in Idaho.

It is definitely a beautiful drive to take Highway 20 through Targhee and Island Park into West Yellowstone, following 191 into Bozeman. I don't know if it is the

prettiest drive in the world, or if Dad's comment stemmed partially from his new state loyalty. Even for unbiased visitors the drive is impressive, but for residents it takes on deeper meaning. I feel a certain anticipation as we pass familiar spots, marking the time it takes to get home. I feel a sense of alertness, for part of what we expect is the unexpected. Driving through Yellowstone Park we expect that at any time we may be surprised by a herd of antelope on the road, a couple of sizeable bison on the shoulder, or if we're really lucky--a moose of ungainly proportions standing in the river next to the highway.

Chief Arapooish said of the Crow country that is now Montana: "The Great Spirit has put it exactly in the right place; while you are in it you fare well; whenever you go out of it, whichever way you travel, you fare worse" (qtd. in Lang 134). My family gets that sort of centered feeling in Bozeman. Even though college and jobs have led my siblings and I away from Montana, as I drive home I always feel that I am returning to the best place.

I realize that Montanans are not the only people with strong ties to place. Thomas Jefferson wrote: "I am happy no where else, and in no other society, and all my wishes end, where I hope my days will end, at Monticello. Too many scenes of happiness mingle themselves with all the recollections of my native woods and fields, to suffer them to be supplanted in my affection by any other." The early

American novelist Washington Irving felt similarly linked to the Hudson River Valley. It provided the setting for his tales such as "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle." He once wrote of the Hudson River: "I thank God I was born on its banks. I think it an invaluable advantage to be born and brought up in the neighborhood of a grand and noble object in Nature--a river, a lake, or a mountain. We in a manner ally ourselves to it for life. It remains an object of our pride and affection, a rallying-point to call us home again after our wanderings" (51).

Like Irving, after my own wanderings, I always find pleasure in returning to Bozeman. To me it seems an invaluable advantage to call Montana home. I remember snowy trips home from college for Thanksgiving when the passengers in our little Ford Fiesta sat on each other's feet to keep them warm. Maybe it is partly the extreme climate that makes one feel more alive in Montana. We don't expect life to be too easy. The warm days that are a given in warmer climes seem like a gift in Montana and are all the better relished. When temperatures hit 40°, people abandon their coats as if it were summer and not just a spring Chinook.

Maybe the extreme winters add to the sense of community. I've always heard that in Montana it is illegal to pass a stranded motorist in winter, since harsh weather could prove fatal. I guess that is actually just a myth of Western hospitality, but it means something just the same. It's not

the law, but it is the custom. Being a good neighbor is not a superficial social nicety in wild country. You help your neighbors dig their cars out because your car could be next, just as farmers once helped their neighbors at harvest time, and then the favor was naturally returned. It just makes sense. A camaraderie stems from the shared experience. When you know what it takes to tough it out in winters that reach 40° below, you admire others who can manage it matter of factly. No one is likely to complain of superfluous issues like weather when those about them are cross country skiing to work daily, rising at 5 a.m. to plow driveways, or snow shoeing from mountainside cabins to the nearest cleared road.

There is even a camaraderie on the drive home. During the last four hours from Pocatello, Idaho, traffic is thin enough and destinations few enough that it is not unusual to recognize cars that pass by. Later I pass these cars, then am overtaken again across the miles and hours. I also find a camaraderie of place. We pass the patches of forest blackened by the Yellowstone fires fifteen years ago, and it doesn't seem tragic to me. The charred stubble seems like natural evidence that life has hard times followed by regrowth--to this I can relate. I used to like to pass the no-limit speed signs and smile and think "only in Montana." It was one of those common sense things. If it's snowing, you might drive 25-35 mph for a hundred miles of highway that is so straight and empty that any reasonable person would



take it at 80 mph on a clear, dry day. But, no-limit speed signs were confusing to out-of-staters and people raised on standards other than reasonableness. They thought it was a high-speed challenge or some kind of unlimited permission, instead of a simple acknowledgement to carry on in the way only you can best judge on any given day. I like to see the poles, six feet tall or so, that mark the edge of the road when the typical yellow lines are too well buried by snow. I like knowing that I will probably see cranes near Crane Hill Road; it is the truth, not just a name.

Traveling home I have a sense of approaching a place that is genuine. In this place, learning to observe is as important as learning to read. I pass yellow caution signs for elk and bison. I pass evocative names like Sage Creek, Teepe Creek Road, Storm Castle Meadows, Hellroaring, Firehole Street, Antelope Flat Road, Little Butte Road, Big Springs Loop, Volcanic Calderas, Nez Percé Trail, and Teton Scenic Byway. Other names remind me that people are not the primary inhabitants here: Porcupine Creek, Moose Creek, Buffalo Creek, Duck Creek, Cougar Creek, Elk Creek, and Squirrel Creek. One of the standard questions after any drive home is: "Did you see many animals?" It is not unusual to report seeing a fox, coyote, hawk, or herd of elk. I know where to look to see giant swans nesting in the middle



sweet pea

of a roadside pond, I've learned where to pause to see big horn sheep in Big Sky, and I have been taught to scan the rivers for animals taking a drink.

One memorable morning, we passed the cowboys herding their horses from the winter quarters through the canyon to their summer meadows and dude ranches. A pickup truck drove at either end of the wild procession, each truck carrying a large plywood sign, spray painted: "CAUTION HORSES." Galloping in a long stretch between the warning trucks, right there with the cars on the narrow, river-winding highway, were dozens of unsaddled horses being fervently guided by cowboys riding horseback on all sides of the herd. I think we counted 67 horses, clattering full tilt on the pavement of the road, occasionally bolting out of line. We breathed a thankful sigh of relief after safely passing the final sign. "HORSES" it said, and that was the truth.

My mother plans to move from Bozeman at the end of this year. She will leave behind the aspen trees she has nurtured from young shoots, naming them after her absent grandchildren. This August, we will all gather one last time for the Sweet Pea Festival. Even without family to visit, Montana will always represent the last best place to me. Driving up into the mountains past Ashton, Idaho, will always seem like "ascending into paradise," as Mum says. I sit more alertly in the car, with that feeling of anticipation, ready to mark off the regular sites. I see the sign to Hebgen

Lake, last chance to bail off the Yellowstone Road if snow conditions seem too treacherous. I watch for the roadside pullout where we can fill our water bottles from a fresh-water spring. We pass Mack's Inn, like an official mile marker; later, the Last Chance gas and groceries shops. Mixed in are the hoped-for surprises of a grey coyote running across the highway, slender antelope bounding up the mountainside, or a cluster of cars pulled off the road which prompts us to join them for a closer look at what wildlife they must have discovered. As we drive closer to Bozeman, I feel the pull, like an emotional center of gravity. I feel more at ease. My car-weary legs feel ready to jump from the vehicle; my voice feels ready to call out, "We're here!"

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